

# The Governess's Story

By Amyas Northcote

We were sitting, a large group of us, round the blazing fire in the old hall one Christmas Eve and the conversation, guided by both hour and place, drifted on to things supernatural. Among those present was old Miss Hosmer, a lady well-known and popular, who, after an early life of struggle and poverty, was now spending her declining years in comfort on a modest fortune, derived from the bequest of a distant relative. In her youth Miss Hosmer had earned her livelihood as a governess and in the course of her scholastic career she had lived in various families and had undergone various experiences, some grave, some, but, alas, fewer, gay; she had seen the skeletons kept in more than one cupboard and had been the confidante of more than one curious story.

As a rule she was chary of recounting her experiences, since she rightly held that the histories of others, however discovered, should be kept confidential, and that more mischief is the result of idle gossip than comes from malicious tale-bearing. In person, she was small, grey-haired, old-fashioned, with a keen sense of humour twinkling in her blue eyes and a warm corner in her heart for those in difficulty or distress. During the early part of our talk, she had remained silent, listening with a queer expression of detachment to the various stories that circulated round the circle, and contributing nothing to them till directly appealed to by Mrs. Leveson, one of her former and well loved pupils.

In a pause of the conversation, Mrs. Leveson turned abruptly to Miss Hosmer and said:

“Can't you tell us a story, Miss Hosmer? I know you have told me more than once that when you were quite a young woman you saw a ghost.”

“No, my dear,” answered Miss Hosmer, “I never told you that. I never saw a ghost in all my life.”

“But surely you had some queer experience of that nature, didn't you?” returned Mrs. Leveson.

“Well,” said the other, “I did once have an adventure of the sort you mention. I don't often speak of it nowadays, and I try to think of it as little as I can.”

“Why?” I interrupted, “Is it anything so very dreadful?”

“No,” said Miss Hosmer slowly. “It was not really dreadful, but it was very, very sad, and I feel, perhaps, that I should be doing harm and causing pain to perfectly innocent people by repeating it.”

“But not if you conceal the names and places,” answered Mr. Davies, the barrister, “and, now you have roused our curiosity so much, surely you will gratify it and tell us the story.”

Miss Hosmer hesitated for a few minutes, and then replied:

“Well, perhaps you are right and, in any case, I hope and believe that I can so conceal identities that none of you will know of whom I am speaking. But I beg,” she went on, “that if any of you do guess, you will keep your guesses to yourselves. Two of the people implicated are alive to-day, and I would not for the world that either of them should have the slightest inkling of what happened in their family when they were little children.”

We promised as she desired, and Miss Hosmer began:

“What I am going to tell you is an experience that I actually underwent many years ago, when I was quite a girl, and had only recently taken up governessing as a means of earning my daily bread. I had been out of a situation for some little time, and was beginning to grow anxious as to

my future; so that it was with a feeling of real happiness that one morning I opened a letter from Miss Butler, at whose agency I was registered, in which she asked me to come round to her office as soon as possible. It was not long before I was with her, when she told me that she had just had an application from Lady K., the widow of the late Sir Arthur K., G.C.M.G., for a young lady to come to her in the country to educate her two children, a boy of nine and a little girl of seven, and to give especial attention to preparing the boy for school. Up to the present, so far as I could gather, Lady K. had had entire charge of the education of the children since her husband's death, but she did not feel herself capable of instructing the boy sufficiently to prepare him for school, and she also desired a resident governess to continue the girl's education after the boy had left home.

"Miss Butler gave me Lady K.'s letter to read, and I gleaned from it that the family resided always at the family seat Wyke Hall, near the town of Delhingham, in one of the Midland Counties. The work appeared to be exactly what I wanted and felt capable of undertaking; the terms offered were quite satisfactory, and the quietness of the life was by no means distasteful to me, since I have always been a lover of the country. It was accordingly arranged that I should write to Lady K. and seek an interview with her to go further into the matter. I returned to my rooms without delay and, having written and posted my letter, I hunted up an old book of reference that had belonged to my father to see what mention it made of the K. family. I quickly found what I sought and learned that Sir Arthur K. had died in 1887, leaving three children. He had been twice married, once to a Miss C. in 1874, by whom he had had one son, Edward, born in 1877, and again in 1883 to a Miss Constance G. by whom he had had two children, Arthur, born in 1884, and Eleanor, born in 1886. As the year of which I am speaking was 1893, this would make the ages of the three children sixteen, nine, and seven respectively. Except that the family residence was Wyke Hall, which I knew already, this was all the information my rather out-of-date reference book contained about the K. family.

"In course of post I received a reply from Lady K. stating that she would be at a certain hotel in London, on a certain not distant date, and asking me to call and see her there. I complied with her request, and one fine morning late in August, 1893, beheld me ushered in a rather nervous condition into the presence of Lady K. On entering the private sitting-room where she was awaiting me, as she rose from her chair to greet me I saw before me a tall, stately, handsome woman of about thirty-five years of age. She was a blonde with aquiline features, a handsome, well preserved figure, dressed in handsome though rather old-fashioned clothes. Her voice was gentle, low and cold, with a curiously monotonous intonation. Her manners were dignified and reserved, though perfectly courteous. She was in half-mourning, and wore no jewellery.

"In short, a first glance displayed a rather fine, if cold-looking woman of the world; a closer inspection revealed something else. Beneath all her perfect manners and frigid exterior there seethed a medley of strong passions; and among these, lurking in the depths and only occasionally peeping forth, was fear. I have always been something of a physiognomist, and I felt sure I was not deceived. Of what she was in fear, and of what was concealed beneath that calm exterior, I could not even hazard a guess; but that Lady K. possessed a secret, and a painful if not a terrible one, I was not an instant in doubt. After our formal greetings we stood looking at each other, and in that brief moment I formed the conviction that I did not and never could like Lady K. However, it is not for a hard-up governess to pick and choose. If Lady K. liked me, I felt I was bound to accept her situation; it would have been impossible for me to go back to Miss Butler and tell her that I had refused an excellent position with a family of standing, simply because I did not like an indescribable something in my would-be employer's face,

“Well, I need not go into the details of my interview with Lady K. except to say that she made most particular and minute inquiries into my capabilities, qualities, failings, good points, family and, in fact, every conceivable thing about me. My sense of dislike to her was not intensified by this inquisition, in fact it rather raised her in my opinion as being evidence that she was a careful and conscientious woman. I noticed also that the mention of her children was the sole thing that brought a gleam of light and happiness into that cold, hard face.

Evidently she adored her little Arthur, her little Eleanor. After a long interview we parted, I going out with the assurance of Lady K. that, if the references with which I had supplied her were as satisfactory as our conversation, I might consider myself engaged to come to Wyke Hall after the holidays were over—in about a month’s time.

“The references proved satisfactory, and one evening in late September saw me arriving at Dellingham Station. It was a fine evening, but the journey from town had been long and tedious and it was growing dark by the time I left the station. Outside, I found awaiting me a well appointed, single-horse brougham, driven by a neatly livened and respectful groom. Into this I mounted and my luggage having been bestowed on the carriage rack we started off for Wyke Hall. So far as I could see, after we had disengaged ourselves from the streets of the little town of Dellingham, we drove through a typical English midland county landscape; gentle rolling hills, green pasture and well-kept arable land were intermingled, and our road seemed to follow generally the course of the little river Dell. We passed smiling farmhouses, and pleasant cottages during the drive: our lines lay in peaceful and homelike places. About five miles from Dellingham, so far as I could judge, the brougham turned up an elm-shaded avenue, and in a few minutes more stopped before the door of Wyke Hall. It was now almost dark, and I could see but little of the house, except that it appeared to be of fair size and to be surrounded by a broad, stone-flagged terrace.

“The front door was opened by a neat looking footman in livery, behind whom loomed the more dignified form of a middle-aged butler, and I entered the hall, which was of considerable size. Opposite the front door was another, which led into Lady K.’s private sitting and business room. Close to this second door, the main staircase of the house commenced; this led up to a wide gallery on the first floor. Out of this gallery on the left-hand side opened a swing-door which gave access to the upper passage of the wing. The butler, having relieved me of my handbag and umbrella, led the way across the ball and ushered me into Lady K.’s room.

“Lady K. greeted me with as much cordiality as she appeared capable of assuming, seated me by the fire, ordered me up a belated, but much welcome tea, inquired about my journey and generally did her best to give me a polite welcome. I still, however, could not get over that faint sense of dislike towards her, which I had felt from the first, and it was with relief that I heard her say as I put down my tea cup: ‘Well, now I suppose you would like to meet the children. I will send for them to come down.’

“And in a few minutes down they came, and at once I fell in love with both of them. It has been my lot to teach and to love many young people, but, assuredly, I can say that in all my experience I never met two to whom I took so quick and warm a fancy, and from whom I received so soon such affectionate devotion. Of the two, perhaps my favourite was the boy, Arthur; he was fair like his mother, but instead of her cold expression he was bubbling over with life and good spirits. He was the leader of the two, and ruled his little sister with a vigour, which, if it had not been loving, would have been merciless. She reciprocated his devotion, and was never so happy as when trotting after him and carrying out his instructions. She was dark—I presume she took after her father—and intelligent, but Arthur was an unusually brilliant child.

We spent a little time in making acquaintance, and I became confirmed in my original opinion that the one really soft spot in Lady K. was her passionate adoration of her children.

“After about half an hour thus spent, Lady K. rose and said she was sure I would wish to see my own quarters, and we accordingly all of us proceeded upstairs. On reaching the swing-door on the upper floor Lady K. pushed it open, and descending a couple of steps we entered the wing of the house, which was traversed by a wide but not lengthy passage terminating in a large window. Lady K. threw open the first door on the right hand of this passage and disclosed a large, cheerful looking room, the schoolroom and general living room, in which the children spent the bulk of their waking hours. Having duly inspected this apartment, we proceeded down the passage to the door of a second room which formed the end room of the house.

This was my bedroom, and I confess to a feeling of surprise and pleasure at seeing the bright and pretty room, a cheerful fire blazing in the grate, a vase of autumn flowers on the dressing-table, and books and knickknacks scattered round.

“After a brief pause we returned to the main part of the house, Lady K. explaining that the room opposite mine was an unused spare bedroom, whilst the space opposite the schoolroom was occupied by a bath-room, housemaids’ closet and similar small offices. On entering the main hall, Lady K. pointed out her bedroom, which adjoined the schoolroom, and was situated above the room downstairs into which I had first been shown. In this, she explained, Eleanor slept with her, whilst Arthur’s bedroom was the adjoining one, and had formerly been her husband’s dressing-room. Beyond these rooms I could see the vista of the main passage through the body of the mansion, but my story does not concern itself with any other than the part of the house I have described, save that I should mention that shortly beyond Arthur’s room I saw the bottom of the staircase leading up to the servants’ attics overhead.

“Our inspection of the house concluded, Lady K. suggested that I should probably wish to retire to my room to unpack and rest, and departed downstairs, taking the children with her.

“I went back to my bedroom, where my luggage, unstrapped and prepared for unpacking, stood neatly ranged, and sat down to think over the events of the last hour. My thoughts should have been pleasant. Here I was welcomed with the utmost courtesy, my future pupils appeared charming and lovable, my surroundings were most comfortable and my convenience had been thoughtfully studied. I should mention that before the children had come down Lady K. had outlined her ideas as to hours of study and recreation, subject to my approval, and had arranged that I should breakfast and have tea with the children in the schoolroom, lunch with her and them downstairs, and that after they had retired for the night I should be served with my evening meal upstairs, so that I might have my entire evenings free and to myself. These plans suited me perfectly; all seemed rose coloured, and yet I could not dispel a lurking feeling of ill-ease for which I could not account. On the whole I felt that it centred round the personality of Lady K. Nothing could be more civil than her manner, nothing could excel her apparent kindness, but—I could not complete my thought, and whilst I was still dreaming there came a tap at the door and an old woman, evidently a confidential upper servant, entered. She at once introduced herself as Mason, whom I had heard mentioned as Lady K.’s personal maid and hitherto the attendant on the children as well. She was a quiet, self-effaced woman, grey haired, blue eyed, and with a sad but not unpleasing face. She explained that she had ventured to come to see if I needed any help, but I suspected that her real motive was to get an early inspection of me, her supplanter with the children. However, I had no wish not to be friendly, and begged her to sit down. She took a chair, and we very quickly found ourselves in friendly talk; she was eloquent on the subject of both the children, but especially of Arthur, and I gleaned a good deal of information from her

about their ways and characters. All I heard was satisfactory, but I observed that once or twice when I endeavoured to turn the conversation in the direction of Lady K. Mason immediately became uncommunicative, and swung the talk back on to the merits of the young people. Our chat lasted perhaps half an hour, when Mason departed to assist Lady K. at her evening toilet, and shortly after a neat, smiling maidservant, who informed me that she was the schoolroom-maid, knocked at my door with the intelligence that my evening meal was ready in the schoolroom.

“Supper finished, I sat awhile still trying to analyse my thoughts and, not succeeding, I returned to my bedroom where I busied myself with my unpacking until feeling rather tired I desisted and went to bed.

“It was not long, I think, before I fell asleep and slept soundly till I was gradually awakened at what I afterwards ascertained was about half-past eleven by the sound of some one walking about in the room above mine. At first the footsteps seemed to mingle with my dreams, but as my senses became clearer the sounds also became more distinct. They were the footsteps of some one walking hastily and irregularly: at times they fell slowly or stopped, at others they hurried almost into a run. They moved all about the room, not confining themselves to any single path or beat, and, though clear and distinct, were not heavy. I remember wondering at the sex of the walker: the steps sounded too light for those of a man and too long for those of a woman. A slight sense of annoyance passed over me; surely it was very late for a servant to be up, and very improper for one of the apparently highly trained domestics of Wyke Hall to be indulging in such antics. Suddenly I heard a window in the room above thrown wide open with a crash and then followed absolute silence. The steps had ceased, and in a little while I fell asleep to wake the next morning to pouring rain.

“The day was a hopeless one and going out was not to be thought of. Accordingly, after we had finished our first morning’s schoolroom work, at which I was delighted with the manners and attitude of both my pupils, Lady K., who had come in more than once to watch our progress, suggested a game in the billiard-room. This room proved to be in the space below the schoolroom and my bedroom, and the game was a great treat to the children, since they explained they were never allowed to play about on the billiard table by themselves, and that Lady K. hardly ever used to indulge them by rushing about after the balls. The rest of the day passed without incident, and I retired to rest feeling myself gradually becoming at home and inclined to laugh at my uncomfortable feelings of the evening before.

“I suppose it was the lack of exercise, but I did not fall asleep as promptly as is my usual custom and, as I lay wakeful, all at once I heard the footsteps in the room above. They began absolutely without warning, and as on the previous night moved irregularly about the room, now fast, now slow. I looked at my watch: it was a little after half-past eleven. As on the previous night, I heard the window thrown violently open, and then came silence. I slept after a while undisturbed and woke in the morning with one of my trying sick, headaches.

“It was a prostrating one, but I had my duty to attend to, and I got through the morning somehow, but when Lady K. came into the schoolroom, towards the end of the lesson I saw her eye me sharply and, I thought, uneasily.

“ ‘Are you not well, Miss Hosmer?’ she said.

I have only got a tiresome headache,’ I replied. ‘I am afraid I am rather subject to them, and I expect it was not getting out yesterday, and sleeping badly brought it on, but it will soon pass off.’

“ ‘Did you not sleep well?’ queried Lady K. with, I thought, a trace of excitement and anxiety in her voice. She hesitated an instant and went on, ‘I hope nothing disturbed you.’

“Yes, there was no doubt—there was anxiety in that last sentence. At the moment the thought of the steps had faded from my mind: as a matter of fact, they had not really disturbed me the night before, or been the cause of my headache.

“ ‘I did not sleep well,’ I replied, ‘but it was my headache coming on; my room and bed are most comfortable.’

“Lady K. looked relieved.

“ ‘Well, you must be quiet now,’ she said. ‘I will take the children out and you must rest and get your head better.’

“I followed her instructions, lay down, and my headache was so far recovered that I was able to come down to luncheon and go on with the day’s programme in the afternoon. This involved an out-of-door excursion, in the shape of a walk; the children lamented the rule, as they wanted to take me round the gardens and stables to exhibit their various treasures, but Lady K. had laid down a strict rule. ‘A walk in the afternoon, playing in the garden in the morning,’ and Lady K. was not one to disobey. So we explored the surrounding Park, and got various views of the house, which showed itself as a finer and larger place than my first nocturnal glimpse had led me to believe. That night the exhaustion following my headache soon put me to sleep, and if the restless domestic walked above me my ears were closed to his or her footsteps.

“The next day broke quiet and uneventful. I felt quite settled down now, my affection for the children grew steadily, and I think they reciprocated it; the servants including Mason were civil and accommodating, and even my subconscious feeling about Lady K. was beginning to diminish. But my peace of mind was to receive a shock that day, and that shock came through the innocent instrumentality of my pupils. We had been rambling about the gardens and stables and farmyard, and I had made the acquaintance of ‘Gallopier’ and ‘Queenie,’ the two ponies, of the carriage horses, of the big Newfoundland ‘Steady,’ and of the stable terrier ‘Spot.’ I had duly admired the two little plots dignified by the names of Master Arthur’s and Miss Eleanor’s gardens. I had looked at the pigs and at the poultry, and had gazed from afar upon those more formidable creatures, the cows, and we were now returning home rather hastily, for the lunch hour was close upon us, when an argument arose between the two children, as to the proper allocation of the windows in the façade of the house, Eleanor maintaining and Arthur stoutly disputing as to which exactly were the windows of the schoolroom. Finally I was called upon to umpire the question, and, glancing at the windows in question, I was easily able to give my decision. But as I looked at the house, and at my windows adjoining those in dispute, I had a curious feeling of something being wrong. For a moment I was at a loss, and then it suddenly flashed across me: there were attics over the main body of the house, but the schoolroom and my bedroom were in the wing, and there were no attics above them. Where, then, could be the room above mine in which some one walked at night, and opened the window? A queer uncanny sensation passed over me, but I had no time to think the matter out, for we had reached the house and the luncheon bell was ringing.

“At luncheon Lady K. proposed that the afternoon should be devoted to driving into Dellingham to endeavour to acquire certain books, which I had asked for as necessary for my pupils, and I had accordingly no further opportunity to investigate the problem of the footsteps. That evening, though I was rather tired, I must confess that, after the schoolroom maid had removed my supper things and left me alone in the wing of the house, I felt just a trifle nervous and wakeful. However, I got resolutely to bed, and, leaving my candle alight, waited. The

expected happened. Just after half-past eleven, without the slightest warning, the steps recommenced their restless pacing. I had nerved myself as to what to do, and I instantly got out of bed and, slipping on my dressing-gown, went out into the passage and closed my door. As soon as I had done so the sound of the footsteps diminished greatly; I went on into the schoolroom and here I could no longer hear them at all. I returned to the passage and, bracing up my courage, opened the door of the spare room. In this room, also, the steps were inaudible; I went back to my bedroom and again they rang out clear and distinct, and in a few minutes more I heard the window thrown up and all became silent. It was clear, therefore, that whatever caused the sound must be directly over my head. I lay awake that night for some time, absorbed in the problem; so far I was puzzled, and slightly nervous, but not exactly frightened. I did not believe in spiritual manifestations, and was convinced that some physical cause was the explanation of the mysterious sounds. At the same time I was sufficiently disturbed in mind to feel that I must discover this cause, or else that I should fall a prey to my nervous imagination. Ultimately I decided on taking the opportunity of the upper part of the house being empty during the servants' dinner hour, and of the children's half an hour with Lady K. after our luncheon, to make an exploration of the top story of the mansion. So resolving, I fell asleep.

"The following day I ran briskly upstairs as soon as lunch was finished; the upper floors were deserted as I anticipated, and I made my way undisturbed to the attics. Here, I found the same long passage as below, save for the notable difference that in place of the swing-door opening into the wing there was a closed archway which appeared as if a door had existed there at one time and had been closed up, and instead there was a window in this archway, which gave light to that end of the passage. I approached the window, and opening it looked out. Beneath me, there was nothing except two low gables with a gutter between them which stretched away towards the end of the wing. One of these gables was clearly over my room and the schoolroom, the other over the rooms on the opposite side of the wing passage. A moment's inspection showed clearly enough that it was absolutely impossible for any room to exist within these gables, which could not have been above four feet high at their topmost point. I leaned out of the window for closer inspection, and suddenly noticed with something of a shock that both the roof and the end wall of the house appeared new, not above a few years old at most. Greatly puzzled, I drew back and tried the door of the attic above Lady K.'s room. It opened easily, and disclosed a room littered with boxes, disused furniture and other lumber. The room was so filled that it would have been impossible for anyone to have paced about it in the fashion I have described; the window also showed no signs of having been opened for a considerable time. Opposite this room was the empty space of the main hall, which extended clear up through the house. I was now greatly puzzled, and, I think, beginning to grow frightened. Who was the walker by night, and where did he walk?

"I had no further time to consider the question as I was compelled to return to my charges, but I decided to take Mason into my confidence and see if she could throw light upon the problem. That afternoon we sallied forth on our usual walk, and this time the children who were my eager guides led me in a new direction. The path which we traversed led us near Wyke churchyard, and we wandered into it to get a nearer view of the quaint old church. As we walked round the outside of the church, Arthur suddenly pulled my arm gently and pointing to a vault a few yards away said:

" 'That's where Papa is buried, and poor Brother Edward too.' "

"The words gave me a start. I knew, of course, that Sir Arthur was dead, and probably buried in the neighbourhood of Wyke, but it had never occurred to me to think that his eldest son should

be lying beside him. It is true that I had never up to this moment heard his name mentioned, but it had scarcely thought of him at all; I had supposed him away at school; I had never conceived the possibility of his being dead.

“It has always been my fixed rule never to try and obtain information as to their family affairs from my pupils, but in this instance I could not restrain myself from the question:

“ ‘I did not know your brother was dead. When did it happen?’

“ ‘Oh, a long time ago,’ said Arthur. ‘Eleanor cannot even remember him, but I can.’

“ ‘I remember him too,’ said Eleanor.

“ ‘Yes, but you were too little to play with him like I did,’ said her brother.

“I did not like to press the discussion and the conversation came to an end; but I was more determined than ever to have a talk with old Mason. That evening I was doomed to disappointment, however, for on asking the schoolroom maid if Mason was in her room I was told that she had gone to stay the night with her brother, a tradesman in Dellingham.

“That night I lay awake and listened for the coming of the steps with a haunting sense of fear. There seemed to be no human agency accountable for them; was there some superhuman cause? Had I felt more at my ease with Lady K. I think I should have spoken to her, but there seemed to be some bar between us, which forbade any but formal intercourse. And in some way which I cannot define it was borne in upon me that she understood those steps, that in her hands lay the key of the mystery.

“The evening hours passed on, and at the appointed time the steps overhead once more sounded. My nerves had reached such a pitch of excitement that I felt I could have faced anything rather than remain in ignorance of their meaning. Had it been possible for me to have transported myself bodily to whatever place the walker moved in, I verily believe I should have rushed thither to face the unknown, to discover the secret. But it was impossible. I felt that night too terrified to leave my bed for the quiet of the schoolroom and, paradoxical as it seems, though I would have faced a ghost or an evil spirit in the unseen, unknown room above me, I could not face the well-known, quiet passage outside my door. The sounds above me ran their usual course, the steps ceased, the window was flung open, silence ensued and I finally forgot myself in an uneasy sleep.

“I woke the next morning nervous and unrefreshed; at lunch-time my state of nervousness was increased by my becoming painfully conscious of the fact that Lady K. was watching me covertly, gloomily, and withal with a certain indefinable expression as of one who expects and awaits a disaster. She talked nothing but commonplaces as usual, and I began to feel more and more confident that in her hands lay the key of the mystery of the night walker. Towards the end of luncheon Lady K. observed that as it was Saturday she thought the children might enjoy a ride. This suggestion was eagerly embraced by both of them, and I found myself with the whole afternoon free before me.

“In due course after luncheon, the ponies were announced to be ready, and having seen my charges safely started off in the highest spirits, under the care of a fatherly-looking old coachman, I mounted the stairs, and went directly to Mason’s room, which was a small one in the main body of the house not far removed from Lady K’s. own bedroom.

“When I entered Mason’s room in answer to her ‘Come in,’ I fancied that for a moment she looked slightly discomposed, and as if my visit was not over welcome. However, she greeted me civilly, begged me to be seated, and, taking up her needle, resumed her sewing. For a moment there was silence, and then she began to ask questions about the children and their lessons in a vague and preoccupied way, as if solely for the purpose of making conversation and avoiding a

disagreeable topic. I answered her as briefly as in courtesy I could do, and then plunged at once into my subject:

“ ‘Mason, who is it that walks about every night over my head?’

“I paused and looked at her. She slowly laid down her work and, paling steadily till she grew a deathly white, sat staring at me in silence.

“ ‘I cannot understand it,’ I went on, ‘What does it mean?’

“She seemed to find her voice with an effort.

“ ‘I don’t know what you are talking about, miss,’ she said. ‘There is nobody walks about this house at night.’

“ ‘I did not say that,’ I answered. ‘But there is some one who walks about over my head every night about half-past eleven and then throws open a window loud enough for anyone in the house to hear him.’

“ ‘Throws open the window,’ whispered Mason to herself, ‘Oh, my God! my God!’ Then in a louder tone she went on, ‘You must be mistaken, miss, there is no room above yours.’

“ ‘That makes it all the stranger,’ I answered. ‘I know there is no room there, and yet I know the steps are there and nowhere else. What is it, oh, tell me what it is!’

“The strangeness of the episode, the old woman’s obvious fear were telling on me; I felt I was losing my self-control, was giving way to panic. By a great effort, I regained my composure, and looking steadily at her said:

“ ‘Mason, there is a story, a dreadful story connected with what I have heard at night. You know it, and you must tell it to me, or I shall go straight to Lady K. and ask her to tell me.’

“ ‘For the love of God do not do that, miss,’ cried Mason.

“ ‘Very well then, tell me the story,’ I answered.

“There was a pause, then Mason said in a low voice:

“ ‘Have you ever heard of Master Edward?’

“I nodded.

“ ‘And that he is dead?’ she went on.

“ ‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘I have seen his grave.’

“ ‘Who told you about him?’ said the old woman. ‘Did anyone tell you he killed himself?’

“ ‘Killed himself!’ I exclaimed. ‘Oh no, oh no. Why, he must have been only a child.’

“ ‘I don’t know,’ said Mason. ‘I don’t know,’ she went on with increasing agitation. ‘I have always felt sure it was an accident. The jury said it was, but why does he walk? If, poor lamb, he fell out by accident, he would be at rest in heaven, and yet he walks. You, who are a stranger to us all, have heard him. Oh, my lady, my lady, why did you drive him to it?’

“Her agitation was pitiable, and absorbed in that I seemed to forget my own fear. But, as Mason grew calmer, I determined to reach the bottom of the mystery, and at last after much persuasion and many questions I elicited from her the following story:

“Sir Arthur K. had been deeply in love with his second wife, and she had apparently returned his affection. At the time of the marriage in 1883, when Mason first came into contact with him, Edward, the child of the first wife, was six years old. He was a pretty, affectionate, spirited boy, a Little inclined to be unduly sensitive, but on the whole a perfectly normal, healthy boy. Sir Arthur was much attached to him, and his stepmother treated him with the greatest kindness. This treatment continued after the births of her own two children, all three were treated as her own, and Mason declared that she as well as Sir Arthur believed Lady K. really felt an almost equal devotion to them all.

“A change came soon after the death of Sir Arthur in 1887. The bulk of Sir Arthur’s estate consisted of the Wyke property, and, at the date of the first marriage, this estate had been settled on the first wife and her children. There was, therefore, little that Sir Arthur could do for the children of his second marriage, save economize and thus form a fund for their benefit, but his brief tenure of life after his second marriage precluded him from accomplishing much in that respect. It is true that he made a will bequeathing any contingent benefit in his estate to his second wife and her children, but this was all. Lady K. herself had no fortune to speak of.

“On his papers being opened after his death it was found that Sir Arthur had left his wife and an elderly clergyman, a Mr. Cameron who had been an early friend of his, joint guardians of the children. Practically, this amounted to Lady K. becoming sole guardian, since Mr. Cameron lived in a remote part of England, was in poor health and really took no interest whatever in his wards.

“Mason was most emphatic that at no time was actual cruelty shown the boy, but she admitted that he was neglected. He was neglected in everything, education, manners, health, companions: all that Lady K. had lavished on her own children whilst Edward was stinted in every direction. It speaks volumes for the natural goodness of the boy that he did not grow to hate his little half-brother and sister, but to the last he was always affectionate and gentle with them, and loved their society. With his stepmother it was different. Violent disputes took place between them, battles in which the impetuous, warm-hearted, neglected child dashed himself in vain against the cold-blooded, heartless woman. Into further details we need not go. Suffice it to say that one evening there was an unusually violent outburst, which ended in Edward rushing, sobbing and distracted, up to his little attic in the wing, for to this remote corner was the future owner of Wyke Hall now exiled. In the morning a gardener found the boy lying on the stone-flagged terrace beneath his window—dead.

“There was an inquest of course, but in deference to the position of the family the inquiry made was as formal as possible. The usual verdict was returned: Death by misadventure; and Lady K. found herself in the position of own mother to the future lord of Wyke.

“But her demeanour did not change, the coldness and hardness, only melted by her children’s embraces, which had been growing on her now for the past few years remained, and she shut herself off deliberately from the neighbours to live solitary with her children.

“After a while rumours began to spread: something had happened at Wyke Hall, the house was haunted. All was very vague, but servants began to leave and it became difficult to replace them. At last Lady K. called her household together in the hall and boldly broached the subject to them. Presently she challenged the assembled party.

“ ‘Well, you say that the room my poor Edward lived in is haunted. Will you admit that you are wrong if I pass to-night alone and in peace and quiet there?’

“There was a murmur of assent. “Lady K. was as good as her word. She passed that night alone in the attic; she left it next morning as calm and composed as ever, but, as the servants noticed, a deathly white. And in a week’s time workmen came and the attics over the wing were pulled down.

“Since that date, the wing, except for the schoolroom, had not been used; I was the first person to spend a night in it since Lady K. had done so three years before.

“This was all Mason could tell me. When she had finished, she sat looking at me.

“ ‘And now you know,’ she said.

“I was shaking with a mixture of fear and anger.

“ ‘I will stay no longer than I must in this house,’ I answered as quietly as I could, ‘and I will never pass another night in that bedroom.’

“ ‘I knew you would say that,’ said Mason, ‘I will have your things moved at once to the room next to mine.’

Thank you,’ I said, and left her.

“All was done as Mason had promised, and that evening saw me installed in my new room. I have never known what the servants thought of the sudden change. I said nothing to the maid, nor she to me. Nor did Lady K. make a single comment. At luncheon the next day she was calm and composed as ever; I caught her more than once eyeing me covertly, but she said nothing of note. That evening, having fully made up my mind, I handed her a note informing her that I desired to leave at the end of the term. I gave no reasons. She read my note in my presence, and in a perfectly unmoved voice said:

“ ‘I shall be sorry to lose you, Miss Hosmer.’

“Nothing further of the slightest interest transpired during the remainder of my stay at Wyke Hall. I was careful always to leave the schoolroom early in the evening and retire to my new room, and I heard the footsteps no more. My relations with Lady K. remained on the same cool and polite footing as ever. Occasionally I thought I saw a look of malice and fear in her eyes, but outwardly we were at peace. To the children I became really attached, and my sole regret at leaving that charming, that dreadful house, was my being parted from them. In fact, as my acquaintance with them grew, I began seriously to regret the approaching close of my relationship with them. I feared I had acted too hastily in resigning my engagement, but it was now too late to draw back. I knew Lady K.’s secret, and she knew that I knew it; to part was the only alternative.

“Many years have passed since then,” said Miss Hosmer, winding up her story, “and I have never seen or heard of the family again. I have a vague impression that Lady K. is dead, and I pray nightly even now that the wandering spirit of that dead child whom she hunted to his grave has also found eternal rest.”